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Bill: SB 966 – Virtual Schools – Statewide Education Platform – Procurement and Establishment
Date: March 30, 2021
Position: Oppose
Committee: Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs Committee
Contact: Mary Pat Fannon, Executive Director

This bill authorizes the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to make a procurement on an expedited basis with the approval of the State Board of Education; authorizes virtual schools to operate on a year-round basis; requires the Department, in accordance with the expedited procurement process, to issue a request for proposals for a statewide platform to provide virtual education on or before May 1, 2021; requires the Department to award a contract for the virtual education platform on or before June 1, 2021; etc.

The Public Schools Superintendents’ Association of Maryland (PSSAM), **opposes SB 966.**

PSSAM continues to support local and state efforts to implement virtual learning initiatives, but we oppose any legislative mandates in the creation of these programs. Local school systems are already fully authorized to provide virtual learning opportunities under existing law, and every district is in the planning phase for their fall programs using the existing guidelines. While current regulations may be need to be adjusted as we reflect on our year-long distance learning, these changes should be contemplated by education experts including MSDE, superintendents, and teachers. We need to retain the ability to create these programs to meet and respond to our local priorities, which also includes working with students and communities.

Additionally, many of the provisions of this bill have been addressed, such as the procurement of a statewide learning management system. The Department recently purchased Canvas. The Blueprint legislation (HB 1372) also encompasses two provisions in this bill – the virtual self-assessment for local school systems, and the charge to use the nationally recognized “Quality Online Education Standards.” (Quality Online Programs: Second Edition, 2019).

In order to preserve the highest quality public education in Maryland, we need to enter the world of virtual learning with a deliberate, methodical, and research-based approach. We need to create virtual school programs that ensure academic success for our students and instills confidence for families knowing that their children will continue to receive the highest quality instruction. As already mentioned, we need to work collaboratively with the Department and teachers, giving them a meaningful role in the development of virtual schools. A more formally developed virtual learning model is imminent, but it now is not the time to rush into its implementation.

For these reasons, PSSAM requests an **unfavorable** report on Senate Bill 966.